

The Deathworlders

Books 

Chapter 0: The Kevin Jenkins Experience EPUB

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The first chapter of what would eventually become “The Deathworlders,” was posted on 4chan some years ago now, as a self-contained story.

At first I thought it had received some pleasant comments and then sank without a trace. It was only after Reddit user “Guidosbestfriend” set his own story “Humans Don’t Make Good Pets” in the same universe and I confessed to having created the setting that I learned that “The Kevin Jenkins Experience” was considered a HFY classic.

Surprising as this was, I then decided to write a sequel, and from there the clamor for more has picked me up and swept me along.

For those who are upset by the strongly antitheistic content of part 0.2, I implore you to power on through it. You may be pleasantly surprised by the resolution to that content.

—Hambone

“Next!” I ordered. I did not at first bother to look up from the desktop in front of me where the standard security systems were scanning the being in front of me for weapons, pathogens, parasites and other such contraband. I only looked up when the machine flashed a message I had never seen before: “ERROR: Unknown Species”

It was small. Barely tall enough to see over the top of my customs desk, in fact. A quadriform biped, forelimbs ending in five manipulating digits. Much of its body was covered in obviously synthetic fabric, with only the forepaws and head visible. Much of the head—the top, around the ears, and down under and around the mouth and nose—was covered in short, coarse fur of a brownish hue, apart from where this had been shaved in front of the ear to accept a cybernetic of some description. My desk registered this as the creature’s

Interspecies Communication Implant, though it seemed like a shockingly crude example.

It met my surprised stare with the level binocular gaze of a species evolved for predation and the hunt. Small, but powerful and dense-seeming. Despite its lack of height, it had strapped a pack to its torso that looked larger and heavier than I could have comfortably carried.

“Abductee 907-42-96-53-3,” It introduced itself. “Name—Kevin Jenkins.”

Fortunately, the crude cybernetic seemed to be functioning perfectly, and I had no difficulty in understanding the thing’s speech, or the subtle body language that spoke of a cocktail of bored resignation and weariness.

I had never had to deal with an abductee before, though I had been trained and knew exactly what to do. I closed the booth, stood up and gestured for the alien to follow me with my second right forelimb. “I will need to interview you in private.” I told it. Him.

He picked up a second bag, and strolled—strolled! While carrying more than I suspected I could physically lift!—after me. Whatever this thing was, it was from a high-gravity planet.

“I know the drill,” He said. “Pretty sure I’ll be leaving this station before long, too.”

“Why would that be?” I asked politely as I ushered him into the private interview corral and activated the privacy field. The sounds of immigration control evaporated as a sudden fuzzy silence engulfed us.

He dropped the bags and they landed with a solid, dense noise that told me they were exactly as heavy as they looked. “It’s only a matter of time before your colleagues in security prosecute me for vagrancy,” he said.

“Why would they do that?” I asked, to make conversation as I prepared the official forms.

“Article 227, paragraph 16 of the Galactic Treaty of Laws,” He said, stretching out and rolling its head. His endoskeleton issued a loud clicking sound and he issued a sigh that my implant interpreted as pleasure. He laughed, a sound that served the exact same purpose as it did in mine, though this one was tinged with bitterness. “Technically, as a member of a pre-interplanetary species, I am a non-sentient specimen of indigenous fauna and therefore cannot be legally employed or own property.”

I indicated my understanding by nodding—another gesture our body language shared in common—and raising the fur at the nape of my neck. “The Corti abducted you, didn’t they?”

“My kind call them ‘*Greys*. ’” he replied.

I nodded. The Corti were small—even smaller than this being—grey-skinned but with large eyes and oversized brains as a result of a centuries-long eugenics program within their species which had vastly expanded their intellect. Most other species suspected that their sense of empathy had atrophied as a side-effect of the campaign to make themselves smarter. They were known for abducting specimens of a pre-Contact species, experimenting on them to acquire biological data, then using that information to be able to sell cybernetic technology to the newcomers that was

appropriate to their biology the second they were welcomed into the galactic fold. Unethical, but the species as a whole could not be prosecuted for the actions of a few and so the sale of the implants went ahead anyway. Kevin Jenkins had clearly been one of their victims.

“Apt,” I said. “Why not have the implant removed and return to your homeworld?”

“Because I’d never be able to keep the secret, and so the Office for the Preservation of Indigenous Species won’t let me,” he said. “Can we please start with the official stuff? I haven’t slept in two standard Diurnals.”

“I apologise,” I said, chagrined at my own lack of professionalism. I activated the corral’s recording function.

“Interview begins, interstellar convenient standard date/time 1196-5-24.4.

Civilian trade station 591 ‘*Outlook on Forever*,’ Customs and Immigration Officer Krrkktnkk a’ktnnzzik’tk interviewing immigrant pre-Contact abductee.

Could you repeat your identification for me, please?”

“Abductee 907-42-96-53-3 Male. Name—Kevin Jenkins. My species refer to ourselves as ‘*Human*.’ Our homeworld is a category twelve temperate at co—”

I interrupted him. “I must ask you to take this interview seriously. Your visa will be denied if you continue to mock the immigration system.”

Its facial feature twisted up into an expression of amusement. “I assure you officer, I am not mocking the immigration system. My species homeworld really is a category twelve temperate. You will find documentary verification of that fact on this data storage.”

I ripped the data from the storage and attached it to the recording. True to his word, a full survey of the “human” homeworld revealed that it was indeed category twelve—a deathworld. Hostile, vicious and forever primordial.

Experimentally I tried to enter this fact onto the paperwork, which of course threw up an error code.

“It is considered impossible for sentient beings to evolve on category twelve planets,” I said.

“As I explained off the record, according to Article 227 Paragraph 16 of the Galactic Treaty of Laws I am, legally, not a sentient being.” it raised its forelimbs and the torso joints moved in a complicated way, denoting resignation.

I gave this some consideration, and scrapped the form. He was quite correct and that status made properly navigating him through the immigration paperwork impossible. The recording would just have to do. Jenkins nodded, and our implants eventually decided that he meant that a prediction had come true. “You can see why the administration on station 442 kicked me out.” he said. “I’m a bureaucratic anomaly. The whole system is far too rigid to accommodate me and mine.”

I caught myself nodding my agreement and shut the gesture down. It would show up on the record and negatively impact

my next performance evaluation. “I get the impression that station 442 is not the only place where you—”

I was interrupted by an alarm. Three short howls of noise—the attack alarm.

“Impossible!” I exclaimed as I leapt out of my chair, and registering the motion the corral shut down our privacy field. The remaining passengers from the shuttle that we had been processing were responding with varying degrees of calmness. Some, more skittish species, were beating a hasty retreat to the shuttle’s airlock, while others waited for instructions.

I had not finished gathering my thoughts when there was a sudden violent lurch that knocked me from my feet. I saw Jenkins sway with the motion and remain upright, despite the fact that he was balanced precariously on only two legs.

A second alarm began to sound—the long wail of a station damage alarm. This was then followed by the angry growl of a hull breach alarm, but oddly not the decompression alarm.

That could mean only one thing.

“Them? Here?” I asked of nobody as I struggled to my feet and trotted to the weapons locker.

“Them?” Jenkins asked, loping along easily next to me in what was clearly much lower gravity than he was evolved for.

The locker reacted to the security codes my station security officer’s harness was broadcasting and opened, spilling out a pair of pulse guns, two personal shield emitters and a magazine of coin-sized nervejam grenades. I slapped the

shield emitter to the power dock on my harness. There was no visible change, but the sense tendrils along my back felt a tingling as the shield came online. The pulse gun configured itself for my species as I picked it up and connected its power cable to my harness.

“Hunters,” I whispered.

Jenkins didn't seem especially frightened by the news, but then I realised he had almost certainly never heard of the only carnivorous species in the galaxy that preferred the meat of fellow sentients.

I didn't have time to explain. There was the sound of pulse-gun fire and a squealing being galloped into the customs area before being caught from behind by a kinetic pulse that hurled it to the ground, broken and dying.

Jenkins sprinted for cover, and I followed. Despite my longer legs, he covered the ground faster and threw himself behind a customs booth as another kinetic pulse missed him. I turned and shot at the Hunter that had aimed at us. My shot evaporated harmlessly against a protection field identical to mine. There were three more behind it and I ducked into cover next to the human as their return fire threatened to overwhelm my defenses.

“We’re in trouble...” I whined. All around us, fleeing and panicking immigrants were being smashed to the ground by Hunter firepower. Jenkins popped his head above the countertop and ducked again as a volley of shots targeted him. “Six of them” he said. “Ugly motherfuckers.”

I had to agree, as I fired a few suppressing shots around the corner. While judging any species by the aesthetic values of

your own species doesn't make a lot of sense, Hunters were ugly. Their skin was a grotesque matte ceramic-white, and their seven eyes, each blinking independently, provided them with exceptional depth perception. On six legs, they were extremely stable, and their forelimbs were cybernetically fused into their heavy pulse guns, making disarming them impossible. These ones were wearing full military combat harness—my own light security harness was no match. Our only hope was the magazine of nervejam grenades which, I realised with a falling sensation of failure, I had left in the locker.

“The grenades...” I swore.

“Only hope?” Jenkins asked. He was holding himself low and hunched, and I could see those dense high-gravity muscles tense and ready under his lightly-furred skin.

I nodded, fighting back the urge to excrete in my terror. If they took us alive, we would be food. By the time I realised that Jenkins had taken off at a flat sprint toward the locker, he was almost a third of the way there.

I knew what I had to do. The Hunters were turning to fire at him as I popped up from cover. They saw me coming but I put three rounds into one and its shield failed against the third. It collapsed, what passed for its face shattered by the impact, and I ducked as its fellows returned fire. One ignored me and kept firing at Jenkins, but he was so fast, so small, and the rounds smacked into the deck plating around him. He threw his feet out ahead of him and slid the last few strides to the locker. He popped up to his feet, looked at me as he raised his arm, and threw, accurately and much, much further than I could have thrown them.

Then a pulse round took him in the torso and flung him against the wall.

I had no time to mourn. I caught the grenades, slipped one from the cylindrical container, counted two light pulses from the indicator around its edge, and threw it toward the enemy on the third. A second later there was a flare of light and shrieking, but it was not enough. Two of the Hunters rampaged past their convulsing comrades, rushing me. I fired, but fear took my aim and the best I managed was a single round that impacted harmlessly against a shield before their return fire broke my own shielding and ruined my arm.

I collapsed, shaking from the pain. The Hunters trotted round the corner, eerily silent—nobody had ever heard them

communicate verbally. I stared at their twin heavy pulse guns, too afraid even to close my eyes before the end.

It didn't come. Instead something black, blue and brown hurtled into the flank of one of the alien warriors with a crunch and a hiss of pain. It staggered, collided with its comrade and fell.

Jenkins—somehow, impossibly alive despite taking a kinetic pulse round to the chest—wrestled very briefly with the Hunter, and then there was a horrible organic splitting noise, the hiss became a shriek, and the gun was in hands, blood and mangled meat dripping from the cybernetic interface.

The second Hunter snap-fired and Jenkins dropped the gun as the shot winged him.

He didn't seem to notice—instead he pounced and a second shot barely missed him before his forepaw lashed out, balled up into a hard knot of gravity-densened bone and flesh which he drove into the Hunter's eye cluster.

It shrieked and flailed, swatting the human with its hindlimbs. He didn't appear to care—instead he caught one of the flailing limbs, braced one of his own feet against the Hunter's flank, and heaved with a roar. There was a grim tearing noise, and the Hunter's leg came away. Its blood sprayed thick and fat through the air, coating the man from the death world but he ignored it. He didn't spare the fallen alien a second glance as he charged at the lone survivor.

It was suicide. The Hunter had a clear shot and took it. Then it took a second.

Then a third, and a fourth, and though every single one was on target, Jenkins just kept going, apparently completely impervious to impacts that would have pulped any other species.

Hunters don't wear inter-species communication implants, but I didn't need one to recognise the fear and panic it briefly had time to show before it was beaten to death with another Hunter's severed leg. Jenkins just kept hitting it, again and again, snarling and shouting, ordering it to die and declaring improbable things about its parentage before finally he stopped and stepped away from the broken thing he had made, gulping down great shuddering breaths of what, to him, must have been very thin and dry air. Then he apparently lost the strength to stand and his forelimbs folded up underneath him. His head sank down until the pointed bottom of his jaw was resting against his torso.

I swallowed my pain and staggered to my feet. My arm dangled useless by my side and every slight movement was agony, but I had to know if he was alive.

The all-clear alarm sounded just before I reached him, and he moved in response to it. One of his eyes had swollen and was turning a dark red-purple. But the other blinked at me and his mouth curled upwards at the corners. I saw that one of his teeth was missing.

“Tough bastards.” he said, and spat bright red blood onto the Hunter corpse next to him.

I couldn't help it. I had to laugh.

I found the human Kevin Jenkins in conversation with one of the station's senior lawyers on the public promenade

deck. I had been retired from the customs and immigration desk on the docking ring while my injuries were repaired, and instead had spent much of the last three groups of eight standard diurnals dealing with the paperwork and investigative work that had followed the Hunter attack. I had seen him only twice since—once when I saw him on the news feed as galactic media briefly turned their attention to our station and its unusual story, and the second time was when I took his statement for the official incident report.

On the news, his eye had still been swollen and ugly, much of his flesh had darkened and bruised from minor haemorrhaging, and he had been wincing with pain every time he drew breath. When I interviewed him, the swelling had gone down and the pain in his breath had gone away. Now, twenty diurnals after the attack, there was just some

greenish discolouration to show that he had ever been injured.

My arm, meanwhile, had needed amputating, and I was still adjusting to the plastic and carbon fibre prosthetic that had replaced it. He raised a forelimb and waggled his paw—hand—at me as I approached, and our social cybernetics agreed that this was a gesture of greeting.

“Kirk!” he exclaimed. He was completely unable to pronounce my name, so had taken to approximating the first syllable, with my permission. He was still yet to explain why he had found it so amusing to call me that. A chair reconfigured itself for my anatomy and I straddled it. Jenkins received no such luxury from the chairs, but seemed comfortable enough anyway.

“I hope I am not interrupting, Lawyer Vedregnenug?” I asked.

“You are not, Officer A’ktnn,” Vedreg replied. He and I were good acquaintances, but his species are sticklers for observing some formalities upon greeting one another.

“Purveyor Jenkins and I were discussing his petition to have his species reclassified as sentient.”

“Purveyor Jenkins?” I asked.

“Back on Earth I owned a recreational establishment,” the human said, sipping his glass of water. I had noticed already that his water intake was surprisingly high considering his size, and made a note to ask him about it.

“I assumed you were military,” I told him. He chuckled.

“Nope.”

“But you were fearless when those Hunters were shooting you!” I exclaimed. He did that complicated joint-lift with his forelimbs again—a *‘shrug.’* “How’s your arm?” he asked, changing the subject.

“I am adapting to it. Thank you. So you think you may be able to have humans reclassified?”

A wave of purple pigmentation rippled down Vedreg’s flank—pessimism. “It would require an amendment to the Galactic Treaty of Laws,” he said “Which the council is historically stubborn to tamper with. Amending the Treaty tends to lose votes.”

Jenkins issued a coarse sound through his nasal orifice—derision—but said nothing. He rolled up the sleeves of

fabric that covered his forelimbs until they were bunched around the mid-joint. I noticed that a patch of skin on his left arm had been artificially pigmented. It was a simple design—one long line, crossed by a shorter one.

His skin went bumpy and raised his sparse body fur. His social implant reported no emotional context for that, so I assumed it was an automatic response to some environmental factor. Aliens can be surprisingly strange at the best of times, but I was beginning to suspect that humans may be weirder than most. The medical report from the team that provided care to Jenkins after the battle said that his blood stream contained a powerful combat drug, though I was certain he hadn't ingested, inhaled or injected any during the fight. There hadn't been time.

Muscles shifted under his thin brown skin as he tapped his digits on the tabletop in a simple one-two-three rhythm. In any other species the movement would have looked obscenely organic.

“Fascinating biology,” Vedred agreed with me, and I indicated embarrassment clearly I had been displaying my fascination openly enough for my social implant to broadcast it. “How strong *are* you, Purveyor Jenkins?”

Jenkins shrugged. “Strong enough to rip the leg off a Hunter and beat another Hunter to death with it,” he said. “I don’t know how that translates.”

“I meant by the standards of your own species.” Vedreg clarified.

Jenkins thought about it. “Uh...I don’t know. I try to stay in shape, but between the low gravity and not getting enough food I’ve probably lost some muscle...about or slightly below average for a male of my size?” he suggested.

Vedreg and I exchanged a glance that bypassed the social implants. “There are going to be a lot of nervous species out there when your kind develop quantum communication,” Vedreg opined.

“You have no idea.” Jenkins muttered. The twin patches of fur above his eyes creased inwards and downwards—my translator informed me that this emotion had no equivalent in my species.

“Unarmed, you single-handedly defeated three of the most feared aliens in known space, and you tell us you are neither a trained warrior nor a physically exceptional specimen of

your kind. The security footage records you being shot seven times by heavy pulse gun fire and you have fully healed in less than three-times-eight diurnals,” I said.

“Many officers have suggested to me that you are a security threat, on the grounds that if you decided to go on a violent rampage, there would be little that could stop you.”

“You have those nervejam grenade things.” he pointed out.

“Those are lethal,” I replied.

“But they’d work. They gave me a splitting headache from across the room.”

I filed this away as a rebuttal for the next officer to approach me on the subject. At that distance, the nervejam grenades should not have affected him at all. Heightened sensitivity? Then I realised I was treating this man who had saved my

life as if he was a threat that I needed to figure out how to kill and suppressed a flash of shame.

“I’m surprised, actually,” Jenkins confessed.

“What by?” Vedreg asked.

“By how easily they broke. I knew I was stronger and tougher than most sentient life, but I had no idea the difference was that big. It’s...intimidating. I feel like Superman.”

“Superman?”

“Uh...fiction. From my homeworld. A human who could fly without wings, and who was impossibly strong and utterly impervious to all attempts to harm him. And he used his power to save the world and protect the weak...Well, except

he wasn't really a human, he was an alien who looked exactly like a human whose parents sent him to Earth because their own planet was about to be destroyed..." he paused. "Complicated."

"Every species has fiction," I pointed out. "Your Superman sounds like T'vnndrkktktk, who defended his tribe from a pack of predators for a year without sleeping."

"Or Gudruvgnagnut, who grew so large that his tribe could shelter beneath him from the year-storm," said Vedreg.

"Though I find it interesting that your greatest hero was not even of your own species."

"We've always thought of ourselves as weak," Jenkins said. I couldn't restrain my strangled bleat of disbelief. "Well, by the standards of a lot of species on Earth, we *are* weak. '*Horses*' can carry more, '*Dogs*' can bite

harder and scent better, most prey species worth hunting could crush an incautious hunter if they turned to fight, and any of the apex predators will happily eat human.

Our closest evolutionary cousins are much stronger than us. We just happen to be the ones who figured out brain power, tool use and teamwork to overcome those challenges.” He scratched his tattoo. “And we have other weakness...”

“What is that?” Vedreg asked. I couldn’t tell if he had failed to notice the human’s discomfort, or if he simply didn’t care.

“Something I’ve never seen since I first started wandering around all these stations” Jenkins said. “Tell me...did either of your species ever have something called *‘Religion?’*”

We gave it a moment's thought. "My implant can't find an equivalent concept."

Vedreg told him. I gestured that this was true for me also. "What is it?"

"Our greatest weakness," Jenkins said. "And the reason you guys are going to shit yourselves when humans finally get off the ground"

We listened, and I privately felt a sense of alarm mounting within me. The concept was very, *very* alien. Humans, it seemed, had for most of their sentient era preferred to invent explanations for the world around them rather than admit a lack of knowledge. They had invented a sentience that was capable of doing any logically consistent thing, capable of knowing anything. Rather than answer the mystery of where they had come from, they had historically preferred to tell

stories and then convince themselves that the stories were true. If Jenkins was to be believed, then the line between fantasy and reality was, for many humans, invisible.

He told us of the myth he had grown up being told was real. How this great power—“God”—had made the universe in a handful of diurnals, and crafted the first humans from the dirt of their homeworld. They had disobeyed him, and been punished. As had their descendants, and *their* descendants, until apparently one tribe had tortured this being’s physical avatar to death—he gestured to the tattoo at this point, explaining that it depicted a crucifix, the very instrument of torture in question. This act somehow convinced this “God” thing to forgive them and be nice to humanity so long as they devoted considerable time and effort to telling it how great it was.

Vedreg had turned a grim shade of worried dark green by the time Jenkins finished telling the story. “So...this ‘God’ created humans, got angry at them, condemned them to be tortured forever and ever after death, and then had itself sacrificed to itself to save mankind from the very torture it was inflicting upon them?” he asked.

“Yes.”

My social implant tentatively suggested that Jenkins’ body language communicated tired endurance.

“And humans believe that this is the real way in which the history of your species unfolded?”

“About a third of us still do, yes.”

We were silent for some time. Vedreg slowly went bluer and bluer until suddenly he erupted. “*Why!?*” he demanded.

“I don’t know.” Jenkins responded, calmly.

“You *don’t know*? You’re wearing the symbol of this...this masochism on your arm and you *don’t know* why your people believe it?”

“I know why I believed it,” Jenkins said. “I didn’t know any better.”

“But...!”

Jenkins interrupted, his implant radiating waning patience and mounting embarrassment. “I was taught this thing from a very young age as if it was true.

I had no reason to believe I was being lied to, so I accepted it. It took me half my life to realise that the people who taught me this thing didn't have to be lying, they could just be wrong."

He swallowed the last of his glass of water. "When I told my family that I had stopped believing that the God myth was true, they accused me of being evil and severed all contact with me. I had to go to civilian law enforcement before most of my property was returned. I was actually driving back from talking with my lawyer about fighting for the right to have contact with my own offspring when I was abducted."

He looked me in the eye. "You have to understand...I come from one of the *more* civilized parts of my planet."

Vedreg and I sat in silence for several minutes, absorbing this news. Jenkins, if anything, seemed grateful for the

silence. “That is...deeply troubling information, Purveyor Jenkins.” Vedreg said, eventually. “It implies that your entire species is insane.”

“I don’t disagree,” Jenkins replied.

“And you’re strong, fast, impervious to pulse fire—”

“Not impervious, just highly resilient,” I corrected. Vedreg ignored the correction and forged ahead.

“Have a gland that generates combat drugs....”

I looked at Jenkins, surprised. He did that shrug thing again, this time wobbling his head apologetically. Vedreg kept going, apparently oblivious to the exchange.

“And now you tell me that your species is gripped by the fervent belief that a tale of breathtaking violence and cruelty

is all true, and that many of you are willing to die in service to the principal *villain* of this story? I'm going to have a hard time convincing anybody that your people should be declared sentient so long as this state of affairs continues.”

“Let me tell you why you need to try,” Jenkins said, quietly.

“Why?”

The human gave a worried smile. “Because if you don’t, you won’t be ready for us.” He said.

In hindsight, I really should have expected that Jenkins would have attracted a journalist’s attention.

Within hours, our conversation was the big talking point on a major interstellar newsfeed complete with an alarmist headline. Clips from it were discussed on political

discussion broadcasts, most of them chosen to show the worst possible take on what Jenkins had been saying.

Three diurnals later, the council convened a special meeting. I was part of the security force that flew Jenkins to Capitol Station to be interviewed by a special committee. I wasn't permitted to witness the interview, but every being that entered that chamber exited displaying the signs of worry and stress.

Events moved quickly after that. A civilian fleet set out to make contact with Earth in the hopes of peacefully talking them down from this "religion"

nonsense. It was met at the edge of their solar system by a vigilante fleet that had apparently been preparing to divert a comet in-system to hit Earth. The navy arrived to break up

the resulting fight, but only after horrible casualties to both sides.

The incident prompted the council to do two things: first they passed an amendment to the Treaty that allowed for a species to be declared sentient if it had developed calculus, rather than interplanetary FTL, though the Contact Prohibition would remain in effect until the species went interplanetary.

The second thing it prompted was the declaration of a surveillance and research mission to Earth. I requested, and was granted, a transfer and promotion to head of security on the research station. The station displaced into the Earth system five eight-diurnals after the mission was announced, using the bulk of a large ringed gas world known as “Saturn” to mask the neutrino burst of its arrival.

Sheathed in a stealth field that bent all electromagnetic radiation around itself, and using centripetal spin rather than generated gravity, it was designed to go completely undetected. The last thing the station did before activating this field was to spit two probes that embedded themselves in Earth's lone, large moon so as to snoop on the human race's communications networks and forward the information to us on the observatory.

We would have begun sooner, if the station had not been fitted with a specialist living module for Jenkins and two other human abductees who had requested a place on the mission. Mounted on a trio of boom arms well out from the main body of the station, it provided the higher gravity their species was used to, as well as a warmer, denser, more humid atmosphere. I visited it only once - aside from being a third heavier than usual, I swiftly felt the heat and

humidity making me unwell and returned to the core of the station, which was tuned to the interstellar norm I was used to.

The other humans were quite dissimilar to Jenkins. Charlotte was from the same landmass and political entity as he was, but was older than him and had apparently joined the mission so as to preach the “truth” of the very religion we were there to study. Most of the crew found it impossible to believe that she was not insane, but Jenkins assured me that her beliefs were considered perfectly normal. He seemed embarrassed by the fact.

The other, a male called Jung, pointed out a peninsula on the prograde end of the largest land mass when asked where his home was. He refused to be drawn on the subject of religion, instead preferring to compensate for the gaps in

Jenkins' and Charlotte's knowledge regarding that region of their planet.

We spent a lot of time monitoring the political situation at first. Jenkins and Charlotte got into a vicious argument about a protracted conflict in a dry, hot part of the world that had apparently only just started when they were abducted.

Jenkins later explained to me that Charlotte had praised what she saw as a war between her own religion against another, rival one.

“It's crazy!” He complained to me, in private. “They're both products of the same religious root anyway!”

I began to suspect, however, that Jenkins had not been entirely fair about his own species. My job was trivially easy, so I spent much of my time browsing the content of

their worldwide data network. Whenever Jenkins was with me, I noticed that he had a habit of focusing on the worst aspects. It was when I started to explore without his guiding hand that I started to find the positives.

I had never paid much attention to poetry, art and fiction. Those things exist in all species, but the alien concepts these things expressed, and the way in which they expressed them, broke through that barrier for me.

Some, I couldn't stand—monotonous, pulsing music that seemed to delight in going nowhere, broadcasts which appeared to take a morbid fascination in the opinions of beings that, among my own species, would have been locked up for their own safety and medicated. Other specimens of their art were interesting, thought-provoking. A few inspired quite intense emotions in me. I enjoyed

watching their movies, and Jenkins and I spent nearly a full diurnal watching first a series of enjoyable fantasies called “Star Wars”, then a trilogy called “The Lord of the Rings” which I then discovered had originally been a book and read.

Our musical tastes were different—he introduced me to his favourite genres, which I found shallow and noisy, he disliked the ones that most inspired me. I had trouble understanding how somebody could hear the music written by Khachaturian, Tchaikovsky, Bach and Rutter and consider them “dull”, but other members of the crew reported that they preferred Jenkins’ taste in music.

Whatever else it was, Earth was a rich source of artistic exports.

It was also a fountain of thought-provoking philosophy, novel ideas and unique pastimes. Human words started to slip into the languages of the station's crew, filling gaps in our philosophical vocabulary. Once every eight-diurnals, five of the crew could be found gathered around a table in the mess hall, rolling number polyhedra and apparently immersed in fantastical battles against impossible creatures that could breath fire, or turn a warrior to stone by meeting its gaze.

Another group borrowed the idea of “poetry reading” and took it in turns to stand up and read their compositions aloud—an exercise doomed to ridiculousness by the fact no two of them spoke the same language, but they took to it with enthusiasm.

I had to gently ask the scientists to stop gambling on the outcome of human contests of physical skill and endurance, or to at least exercise some moderation.

As part of my job, I was required to pass information of potential military significance back to the Council. The concept of the “taser” was among the very first. The idea of the “suicide bomber” was alarming, and caused something of a stir when it was presented to the committee for interstellar security, who called an emergency session to think up means by which such an insane tactic could be countered. In the end, they wound up stealing the best ideas from humanity itself.

It was only when I encountered the idea of the “tortured poet” that things started to fall into place. Up until that point, I had been struggling to reconcile the artistic power of

these beings, and the nobility of their heroic visions of themselves, with the relentless delusion and grinding unpleasantness enacted in its name that played out before me. Now I began to see the shape of it.

The “Demons”—a loan-word that had filled a conceptual gap we had never been aware of—that tormented humanity were what inspired it. Surrounded on all sides by an ecosystem saturated with toxic microfauna and parasitic nano-organisms, by vicious predators, hardy prey and an explosively unstable tectonic world, they sacrificed their own peace of mind on the altar of evolution.

They are...not crazy. They are something far more than that. They are tortured geniuses. When they finally get off their world in a meaningful way, when they finally become

eligible for contact and for introduction into the interstellar community, we will need to handle them with utmost care.

They are physically powerful. They are strong enough to wield firearms that are powerful enough to overwhelm even the most powerful personal shielding, while our own weaponry will hardly slow them down. The chemical weapons they use as less-lethal alternatives would slaughter us. The water cannons they use to suppress riots would pulverize our bones. They are not only willing to die in the name of a fiction, they will do so gladly and eagerly. They are mentally overwhelming—their ideas are powerful, their inventiveness puts us to shame, their philosophy explores avenues of thought that simply never occurred to us.

But the most important part is that they must never, ever learn how much superior they are to us in so many ways. I

think the idea would break them.

You see, Earth is a death world. To survive, they had to evolve not just intelligence, but the ability to apply it like a weapon. They didn't evolve to merely overcome adversity—they evolved to thrive on it. They *need* to have something to aspire to, something they think is bigger than they are. They need something to fight. Without a challenge, I think they very swiftly get depressed.

Kevin Jenkins did. I didn't see it at the time, but I think that getting into space and finding that he could rip the limbs off its worst terrors really upset him. He never told me why he asked to have his social implant removed, and why he went back to Earth. But I can guess.

He did it because there are more challenges down there among his own kind than he would ever find up here,

among us.

—“Kirk” Krrkktnkk A’ktnnzzik’tk, Memoirs.